

Students with Autism Participating in Recess

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Introduction

The participation of a student with autism in recess can often be both challenging and rewarding for all students and the general education teacher. This paper will address common characteristics of students with autism and present basic solutions to improve the education of these students in the recess setting. Initially the definition, behavioral characteristics, and prevalence of autism will be presented. This will be followed by a brief discussion of autism for an individual in the classroom, and possible benefits, challenges, and solutions for children with autism in the recess setting. Lastly, specific methods of including a student with autism in a basic recess activity will be discussed.

Definition, Behavioral Characteristics, and Prevalence of Autism

Autism is defined by the Autism Society of America (ASA) in the following manner:

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities (Autism Society of America, 2009).

Autism is considered a Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD), a category of neurological disorders characterized by “severe and pervasive impairment in several areas of development” (Autism Society of America, 2009). This spectrum of disorders is often recognizable by specific characteristics such as communication problems, no eye contact, repetitive behaviors, and stemming. Stemming is a characteristic in which an individual fixates on something, generally a body part, and moves it up and down or in another repeated motion (Autism Speaks, 2009). It is to be noted that in the United States today, one in 150 children have autism (Autism Society of America, 2009).

As a result of the behaviors previously noted, one can understand that a major characteristic of autism is impaired social interaction (Child Development Institute, 2009). Impaired social interaction can include difficulty participating in groups and turn-taking. In addition to the characteristics previously noted, another reason for this impairment is the fact that children with autism often have difficulty managing behaviors.

These inappropriate behaviors often come from trying to communicate their likes and dislikes. However, this is often difficult for children with autism because they are often unable to effectively express themselves verbally – they often speak in one-word sentences or are non-verbal. If a child is unable to find a method to communicate needs, a variety of irregular behaviors often seem to occur. Behaviors include self-injury, tantrums, or some kind of aggression (Matson, 2009).

Frustration with communication skills are not the only cause of irregular behaviors. These behaviors can also come from wanting/need attention, or not understanding a situation in its entirety. One such reason for not understanding a situation would seemingly be the result of a simple lack of experience with many activities. It should be noted that when a child exhibits an undesirable behavior, and not discouraged from the behavior, the undesirable behavior is even more likely to be reoccurring (Chiang, 2008).

Challenges for a Child with Autism in the Classroom

The authors feel that it is important at this time to present to the reader a brief synopsis regarding the challenges for a child with autism in the classroom. This is deemed important as it will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the challenges in the more specific location – in the recess setting. In terms of challenges for a child with autism in the classroom it should be noted that undesirable behaviors tend to often appear in educational settings seemingly because of the increased demands placed on the child, including the needs and desires to communicate with more individuals. In educational settings the child will often be expected to perform many tasks throughout the day. Often, when these tasks become too demanding, the child may act out in order to escape the behavior. When a child with autism needs to act socially with others, it is important to make sure that there is a structured area that will allow for the children to interact. Also, if the child feels a need to leave the situation, there needs to be an ability to remove from the situation (Ball, 1996).

As noted previously, when in the educational setting additional undesirable behaviors for students with autism often appear. Children in school tend to participate in, “off-task behaviors, inappropriate vocalizations, and other disruptions” (Conroy, Asmus, Boyd, Ladwig, & Sellers, 2007) as well. Being off-task, shouting, and interrupting the class in other ways will also lead other children to off-task behaviors.

Benefits and Challenges for Children with Autism In the Recess Setting

As is commonly agreed upon, the benefits of participation in regular recess activities are high. These benefits can be found in two major areas – social and physical. Specifically, research has shown that some of these benefits of recess include:

- Improves attentiveness (Pellegrini, Huberty, & Jones, 1995)
- Improves out-of-school activity levels (Dale, Corbin, & Dale, 2000).
- Improves general fitness and endurance (Kids Exercise, 2009).

However, as a result of many of the previously-noted characteristics associated with autism, special considerations must be made to properly instruct a student with autism in the recess setting. These considerations are to address the previously-noted challenges that are often present in children with autism including:

- Difficulty playing in groups.
- Difficulty communicating with others.
- Difficulty waiting for turns.
- Inexperience due to a lack of opportunities and practice.

Possible Solutions to Challenges for Children with Autism In the Recess Setting

The following chart notes possible characteristics associated with children with autism and possible solutions to these challenges in recess. It is important to remember that not all of these characteristics are prevalent in all individuals with autism and not all of these solutions will be successful when working with all children with autism. They do, however, represent a solid foundation.

An important factor to remember for students with autism is to develop an environment that is cooperative and allows for the student to communicate. Such an environment would seem to lead to a high comfort level which would in turn seem to be beneficial to many children with autism. Table 1 lists some possible characteristics of the student with autism and possible solutions that can be used in recess to lead to a comfortable and beneficial environment. Following this chart a specific case incorporating modification procedures for including a student with autism in a recess activity related to throwing and catching a ball is presented.

Table 1: Helpful Tips for Children with Autism in Recess.

Autism Characteristics	Items to Remember in Regards to Characteristics
Difficulty playing in groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Assign playmates (partners).▪ Have scheduled/ structured activities.▪ Fewer activities in a particular time span (due to difficulty with transitions).
Difficulty communicating with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Provide alternate forms of communication.<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Pecs▪ Communication cards/ other picture systems▪ Sign language▪ Notepads/ drawing materials
Difficulty waiting for turns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Keep waiting to minimum.▪ Practice turn taking.▪ Systematic turn taking (ex. Use a counting method. Every time the student reaches the number three it's the next person's turn.)

Inexperience due to lack of opportunities and practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide opportunities. ▪ Demonstrate activities before playing (participating in). ▪ Have peers demonstrate activities.
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Methods of Including a Student with Autism in a Throwing and Catching Recess Activity

For the purpose of discussion of including a student with autism in recess, students will be participating in a simple activity of throwing and catching. As such, the skills that are being worked on in this activity are throwing, catching, and turn taking.

To appropriately include an individual with autism in such a recess activity the following modifications should be made.

1. A partner should be assigned to the student with autism because of the difficulty often shown in playing in groups. The partner should be an individual for whom the student has shown comfort with while participating in similar activities.
2. The activity should be continued without interruption if possible due to the often-present difficulty with transitions.
3. An alternative form of communication should be provided such as communication cards for the student. For this, and other reasons, a teacher should be present to better allow for communication.
4. Because of the often-present difficulties in terms of turn taking, the partners of the child should remind the student before a transition is to take place. Noting to the student that he/she has three more turns before another individual is to take a turn is often extremely beneficial.
5. Due to a probable inexperience in the activity due to a lack of opportunities, partners – or the teacher – should provide short demonstrations of the activity. In this case, two students adjacent to the student and his/her partner should demonstrate a few turns of throwing and catching.

Although these modifications may seem simple and also just marks of quality teaching, they are of the utmost importance for including a student with autism in such a recess activity.

Conclusion

The participation of a student with autism in recess can often be challenging and rewarding for the student, the student's peers, and teacher. These rewards can manifest themselves in the ability of the teacher to guarantee the safety of all students in an instructionally sound environment. This paper has hopefully addressed some basic concerns and solutions to improve the recess setting of students with autism.

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